

2: Jones-Jackson L-5 (1973-1986) 1987
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina

Social Structure 23

621 given island in order to be accepted as a natural member of the commu-
602 nity. Members who are brought to the islands as spouses are recog-
nized as members by association with a known island family, but even
one who has been married to an islander for twenty or more years
never achieves the status of a full member of the community.

621 Membership is most often established through oral transmission of
602 lineage, as opposed to birth certificates or other documents. Thus one
• 613 is expected to know one's lineage, for this knowledge can mean the
difference between acceptance and rejection in any social setting. It is
normal protocol, for example, for a young person to undergo seem-
ingly intense interrogation by an older island resident who wishes to
place the younger person. If one can explain satisfactorily who one's
parents are, who one's parents' parents are, or even who one's cousins'
parents are, then kinship is established and one is viewed as a member
of the community to be accorded all due warmth and hospitality. The
[609] islanders can be chilly and sometimes openly hostile to strangers,
black or white, who have no local kinship ties or affiliations.

596 As would be expected in such closed communities, familial ties,
marriages, and the concept of the extended family are taken with ut-
most seriousness. The extended family is an African-like social tradi-
tion on the Sea Islands, just as it is in most inland black communities;
acknowledging and readily accepting the obligations and responsi-
bilities due not only to one's spouse but also to one's spouse's family is
a part of island culture. The "conjugal bond is strong and literally lasts
581 until death parts the spouses," and common-law marriages are as valid
588 and stable in the eyes of the community as those marriages contracted
586 under law. There is a low incidence of divorce and separation. Dis-
agreements and conflicts do arise in Sea Island households, of course,
593 as they do in any household. But understanding and accepting the rela-
596 tionships inherited in an extended family appear to alleviate many of
the conflicts experienced in the sort of nuclear family that is charac-
teristic of European cultures, such as mother-in-law/daughter-in-law
[618] antagonism. Like the members of extended families in Africa, people
on the Sea Islands act with deference toward their elders, and most
elders accord a great degree of respect to young adults, especially
those with children. That is, conflicts are minimized because each
member acknowledges and respects the others' domains.⁴⁴

582 Most of the inhabitants of any given island are related; thus mar-
riage between persons from the same island is not encouraged. Chil-